

Pandemic Influenza (“Flu”)

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What is pandemic flu?

A pandemic is any outbreak of a disease that happens in many different countries at the same time. A pandemic of influenza, or flu, occurs when a new flu virus rapidly spreads from country-to-country around the world. This rapid spread of flu can happen because most people will not be immune to a new flu virus, and it is possible that a vaccine against the virus will not be available until months after the new virus first appears. In addition, people with flu who travel from country-to-country in airplanes can be a source of infection, as occurred in the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) outbreak in Asia and Canada in 2003. Pandemics are not just a particularly bad flu season. In fact, they are not seasonal at all; they can happen anytime.

What is the difference between a pandemic and an epidemic?

An epidemic is an outbreak of a disease that occurs in one or several limited areas, like a city, state, or country. Once the disease spreads beyond the borders of several countries and affects many countries across the globe, it is called a pandemic. In the 20th century, several pandemics of influenza occurred – the biggest one in 1918. During that pandemic, at least 500,000 Americans died and it has been estimated that there were as many as 10 million deaths worldwide.

What is avian flu?

There are many strains of flu virus and certain strains can infect human, birds, or animals. An influenza virus strain that infects birds is called avian, or bird, flu. Usually this virus just infects birds, and when an outbreak occurs it can have a very serious impact on poultry flocks. Outbreaks of avian flu have occurred in the last five years in the United States and Canada. An ongoing outbreak of avian flu in several Southeast Asian countries has resulted in the killing of millions of chickens and other domestic birds to control the spread of the disease. Rarely, a virus may be able to infect both birds and animals, or birds and humans — and that's where the trouble for people begins.

Why should we be concerned about a virus that infects chickens?

The strain of avian flu causing the outbreak in Asian birds is concerning for several reasons:

1. This flu strain can spread from birds to people, and when it does, it can cause very serious human illness and even death. So far, the virus does not appear to spread easily from person-to-person, but that could change.
2. Whenever a bird flu strain infects people, there is a chance that the virus could mutate to a brand new flu virus that spreads easily from person-to-person and causes serious illness.
3. Infections with new human flu strains can't be prevented by the flu vaccine that people get each year, so no one will be immune to the virus. Making a safe vaccine that can prevent infection with a new human virus can take months.
4. Because the virus can't be easily controlled, it could spread rapidly around the world and cause a pandemic.

What is the Department of Health doing to prepare for pandemic flu?

- The Department of Health, working with local health agencies across the state, monitors influenza each season by doing several things:
 - We ask doctors and others who see patients to count the number of patients they see each week with a flu-like illness.
 - We follow the number of children who are absent from schools, because school-age kids are usually the first to get flu when it arrives.
 - We ask nursing homes to let us know if their patients begin to get sick with something that looks like flu.
 - We ask doctors and laboratories to send us samples from patients with flu-like illness so we can try to grow flu from the sample. This helps us to know if the virus circulating in our state is the same strain that is active in other parts of the United States, and whether or not that year's flu vaccine protects against the virus we have identified.
 - We follow the trends in the number of people who die in large Washington cities from flu and pneumonia — a serious lung infection that can be a complication of flu.
- Our Public Health Laboratories perform specialized testing for flu and send samples of influenza to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) where they use information from Washington and other states to determine what strains of flu should be covered in each year's flu vaccine.
- During each yearly flu season, the Department of Health promotes the use of influenza vaccine and provides flu vaccine for children under 19 years of age who are candidates for the vaccine.
- All year long, we ask doctors to report any serious or fatal illness where they were unable to find a cause for the illness, so we can do testing for flu.
- We monitor updates from the CDC and the World Health Organization on influenza vaccine developments and events related to flu, including the outbreak of avian flu in Asia.
- We work with other agencies in Washington and the surrounding U.S. states and Canadian provinces to revise and maintain Pandemic Influenza Response Plans that have been developed in both countries.
 - Washington State Department of Agriculture would lead the response to any cases of avian flu that threatened Washington poultry flocks and would work with their counterparts in the U.S. and Canada.
 - Local health agencies are working with hospitals and doctors in their areas to ensure that the hospital have a plan to respond in the event of a large-scale outbreak like pandemic flu.

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